No Time Left to Hide

—"I've changed every part of me

Until the puzzle pieces aren't me at all."

Conan Gray - Jigsaw

The loud director's cue—"That's a wrap!"—echoed through the studio at exactly 6:45 PM. The sudden shift from high-energy production to the quiet rustle of packing gear caused Est's carefully constructed mask to shatter entirely.

He stood motionless in the center of the set, watching the crew swirl around him like water, trying not to drown. His chest felt tight, his breathing shallow. The meeting with Hong was less than ninety minutes away, and the anxiety was becoming a physical thing—a weight pressing down on his shoulders, making it hard to think, hard to move.

Est forced himself to calm down by remembering William's words: "Scared people make mistakes, but you can fix this."

But what if he couldn't? What if he showed up at that restaurant and Hong took one look at him with those cold, icy eyes—the same eyes that had looked through him in the studio all week—and decided that Est's apology wasn't enough?

The fear was suffocating.

As the crew packed up around him, Est's composure began to crack from pure anxiety regarding his impending meeting with Hong. He found himself scanning the studio, searching for that one steady presence that had somehow become his anchor in all of this chaos.

William was coiling cables near the back of the set, his broad shoulders hunched slightly, his movements methodical and precise. He hadn't looked Est's way in hours, but somehow, that made Est need him even more.

Est crossed the distance between them, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"William," Est said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Can we—can I talk to you for a moment?"

William looked up, his dark eyes meeting Est's. For a fraction of a second, something flickered across his expression—something raw and vulnerable—before he carefully masked it.

"Of course," William said, setting down the cables. "What's wrong?"

Est glanced around the studio, suddenly aware of how exposed he felt. He gestured toward the quieter corner near the storage area, away from the remaining crew members. William followed without a word.

Once they were alone, Est's carefully constructed calm completely fell apart.

"I'm terrified," Est confessed, his voice cracking as he abandoned all his usual pride. His hands were shaking, and he didn't bother trying to hide it. "What if Hong just looks at me with cold eyes? What if he hates me for leaving? What if I show up and he decides I'm not worth forgiving?"

William had to maintain his composure while offering reassurance—a task that felt impossible when Est was standing so close, looking so vulnerable, so utterly lost.

He looked at Est, knowing that in just over an hour, Est would be sitting across from Hong, fixing a past mistake. He knew what was coming after that—the moment when the truth would detonate, when Est would realize that the person who had given him courage was the same person he'd been searching for all along.

William had never been a desperate beggar searching for love. But standing here, watching Est tremble with fear, watching him look at William like he was the only solid thing in a world of shifting sand—it made him feel like a thief. A thief stealing affection under false pretenses, knowing that if he could get just a little more warmth from Est before the truth came out, he would take it.

Forcing his voice into that steady, low rumble that Est had come to trust, William stepped closer and looked directly into Est's eyes.

"He texted you back a location, didn't he?" William asked softly.

Est nodded, confused by the question.

"He didn't text you back to punish you," William continued, his voice carrying the weight of every word. "He texted back because he was waiting. He's been waiting for you to come back, Est. He won't look at you with cold eyes if you bring him the truth."

The double meaning of the words hung between them, a secret William carried alone.

Est took a deep, ragged breath, his shoulders dropping slightly as some of the tension drained away. He nodded, looking at William for a long moment.

"Thank you," Est whispered. "For everything."

The words felt like daggers.

Est stepped away, heading toward the exit. William remained in the rapidly

emptying studio, physically tracking the minutes as Est disappeared into the Bangkok evening.

Unable to contain his anxiety, William sent a single, quiet text to Hong:

WILLIAM: He just left. He's terrified. Please be kind.

Hong didn't reply.

The lack of response forced William to confront himself, realizing that, while he had succeeded in encouraging Est to be brave, he had cornered himself into a dead end where he had to give up his own identity.

Est had left the studio, and William was entirely alone, as he moved through the empty studio, collecting his belongings with mechanical precision. He looked at the supportive messages from Lego and Nut on his phone.

The messages were meant to be comforting, but they only amplified the weight of what was coming. William knew that in less than two hours, everything would change. And unlike Est, who at least had the possibility of redemption and forgiveness, William had only the prospect of rejection.

The quietness of the emptying studio became suffocating.

Every vibration of his phone caused a surge of panic—was it Hong telling him the conversation went smoothly? Or had the bomb detonated early, Hong unable to keep the secret?

William locked the studio and headed out into the humid Bangkok night. But instead of going home, seeking solitude, he found himself driving toward the one place where he wasn't a ghost anymore.

Lego's apartment.

William arrived unannounced, his hands still shaking from the encounter with Est. He stood in the hallway, hesitating before gently knocking on the door. His respect for Lego and Tui's newfound privacy made him consider turning around, but he couldn't. He couldn't be alone right now.

The door opened almost instantly.

Lego stood in the doorway, wearing a soft, oversized sweater, his hair down and loose. Behind him, William could see Tui sitting on the couch, one arm draped over the back where Lego had been sitting.

Seeing William's tense frame, Lego didn't tease him. Instead, he pulled William inside by his wrist, his expression shifting to understanding.

"Liam," Lego said immediately, stepping aside. "Come in."

"I didn't mean to—" William started, but Lego cut him off.

"You're not intruding," Lego said firmly, grabbing William's wrist and pulling him inside. "You're never intruding."

Tui immediately stood up and crossed the room, handing William a warm mug of tea. He didn't say anything—just a wordless understanding of the immense pressure his friend was under. William sat heavily on the rug, cradling the mug between his large hands. The warmth was grounding, real.

"I came without calling," William said, his voice rough. "I'm sorry. I know you two—"

"Stop," Lego interrupted, sitting down beside him. "You could never be an intrusion. You're part of us, Will. Always."

Tui settled onto the couch above them, creating a protective circle. They sat in the living room as a unit, watching the digital clock on the microwave creep toward 8:00 PM.

"He was so scared, and he looked at me like I was the only person who could save him. And I let him believe that. I let him soak up comfort from me while knowing that I'm the last person who should be giving it to him." William confessed, his voice low and painful.

Tui reached down and placed a firm hand on William's shoulder. "You earned it yourself."

"How?" William asked, his voice breaking. "How did I earn his trust by lying to him?"

Tui's grip on William's shoulder tightened. "No matter what tomorrow brings, you will never have to go back to the dark isolation of your past. We won't let you. Even if Est rejects you, even if everything falls apart, you have us. You're not alone anymore."

William closed his eyes, letting their presence anchor him.

They sat like that for a long time, watching the clock tick toward the moment of truth.

At 8:47 PM, William stood up.

"I need to walk," he said quietly. "Clear my head."

Lego and Tui didn't try to stop him. They just pulled him into a tight group hug.

William decided to walk back to his own apartment, letting the humid Bangkok night air match the suffocating weight in his chest. He passed by couples holding hands,

busy street stalls, glowing shopfronts filled with life and movement. He passed by a group of teenagers laughing, their voices echoing off the buildings, and he felt completely isolated from all of it.

But as he walked, something shifted in him.

This pain was necessary. This fear, this anxiety, this suffocating weight—it was the price of finally stepping out of the shadows. It was the cost of being honest, of being brave.

He accepted that his time as a ghost was officially running out.

By the time he reached his apartment, William had made a decision, he would walk into that studio, find Est, and tell him the truth. Not the careful, calculated version. The real version—all the fear, all the longing, all the desperate hope he'd been carrying since the night they met.

He would be brave, just like he'd asked Est to be.

Even if it destroyed him.

Meanwhile, at the bar with a large terrace, string lights draped overhead, and small screens playing old movies in the background. It wasn't very crowded yet, which made the space feel both intimate and exposed. The evening was still young, the sun only just beginning its descent toward the horizon.

His heart hammered against his ribs as he spotted Hong sitting at their old table near the edge of the terrace. Hong looked up, his expression guarded but—true to his word to William—there were no cold eyes. Just an expectant silence.

Est took a seat, the ambient glow of the terrace lights hitting his face. His voice shaking, he completely dropped his guard.

"Hi," Est said quietly.

"Hi," Hong replied, his voice neutral.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Finally, Est took a deep breath and began.

"I'm sorry," Est said immediately, not bothering with pleasantries or excuses. "I'm sorry for ghosting you. For using you. I was terrified of my own mistakes, and I thought running away was easier than facing your judgment. But it wasn't easier. It was just... lonely."

Hong watched him carefully, his expression softening slightly. He could see the

profound change in Est—the way he had completely dropped his guard, the way his hands were trembling on the table. This was William's influence, Hong realized. This was the bravery William had helped Est find. But Hong kept the secret perfectly, listening as Est poured out his apologies, his regrets, his desperate need for forgiveness.

"I forgive you, Est," Hong said, his voice warm. "But I also want you to talk to the boys. No more secrets. I want to know everything, in detail."

"Everything?" Est repeated, confusion flickering across his face.

Hong nodded, leaning back in his chair. "Everything, Est. I want to know why you really disappeared. What you were looking for. And don't tell me it was just about guilt."

Est froze across the table.

He wanted to be entirely honest—he really did. But there was a massive gap in his memory from the night of the party. He could remember arriving with Hong, remember the warm chaos of the group, remember laughing and feeling like he belonged.

But after that? Nothing.

"Hong, I..." Est's voice faltered. "I—" Est started, his voice breaking. "I don't remember everything."

Hong's expression shifted slightly, becoming more focused.

"The night of the party," Est continued, his hands trembling slightly as he lifted his glass to his lips, needing something to ground himself. "I remember arriving with you. I remember the group. But then... there's a gap. A blank space. I went home with someone that night, but I can't remember who. I can't remember their face, their voice, anything. And I've been..." His voice broke. "I've been using you all to try to find clues. To figure out who that person was."

Hong watched Est's genuine distress and realized just how deep the tragedy went.

He kept William's secret perfectly. He thought about the rooftop conversation, the pact they had made. And he thought about Lego, who had seen through Est's mask a long time ago.

Hong leaned forward, his expression softening.

"We knew you were looking, Est," Hong said quietly. "Lego told us. He saw through your mask a long time ago. And instead of calling you out on it, he kept your secret because he cared about you. But we didn't push you because we thought you'd tell us when you were ready."

Est sat in the ambient glow of the terrace lights, completely stripped of his pride. He realized that he had thought he was being so careful, so clever, using their friendship as a tool to find answers. But they had seen through him all along.

"I felt incredibly lonely and desperate," Est admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "Because I couldn't remember anything, I panicked. I thought if I could just figure out who that person was, I could—I don't know. Fix something. Heal something. But instead, I just hurt you all."

Hong's expression remained soft, no trace of anger or resentment.

"You weren't as good at hiding as you thought," Hong said with a small, sad smile. "But it's okay. I get it now. You were lonely and desperate. You didn't know what else to do."

He reached out and patted Est's shaking hand.

"We would have helped you if you just asked," Hong said gently. "You didn't have to play a game with us. You didn't have to pretend to be someone you weren't. You didn't have to play a game with us, Est."

The words landed like a benediction.

Hearing Hong's gentle forgiveness, Est made a conscious decision right there at the table.

He thought of Dana's advice—advice she'd given him in a quiet moment that felt like a lifetime ago: "The strongest thing you can do is let it go. Not because you don't care, but because you're brave enough to accept that some mysteries aren't meant to be solved."

Est consciously let go of the desperate, painful mystery of that blurry warehouse night. He stopped treating Hong like a puzzle piece or a tool to find clues. He stopped strategizing about how to extract information or manipulate conversations.

He just focused on being present. On sharing a genuine laugh. On enjoying a simple dinner with someone who truly cared about him.

This shift brought a profound, kind warmth to the terrace.

Hong noticed the sudden, relaxed change in Est's shoulders and smiled—a real smile, the kind that reached his eyes.

Est realized that by letting go of the ghost of that warehouse night, he was finally allowing himself to heal. The mystery would remain unsolved, and somehow, that was okay.

"You're right, Hong," Est said softly, looking across the table under the ambient

lights. "I was using you guys, and I'm so sorry. But I'm done searching. I don't care about who that person was anymore. I just want my friends back."

Hong's eyes glistened slightly.

"You have us, Est," Hong said simply. "You always did. You were just too scared to believe it."

As the dinner ended and they stood up to leave, Hong pulled Est into a tight hug—the first real physical contact they'd had since the icing began weeks ago. Est held on tightly, feeling like he was finally coming home. Hong kept William's secret perfectly, but he felt an immense respect for how brave Est was being.

Est drove away from the restaurant terrace with a light heart, completely done with searching for the mystery man. The moment his car pulled out of sight, Hong pulled out his phone to fulfill his promise to William.

William's dark, quiet apartment was suffocating him. His phone vibrated aggressively on his desk, breaking the silence like a gunshot. The text from Hong read exactly as William had expected:

HONG: He genuinely apologized, Liam, and he's letting go of that warehouse night entirely. He's done searching. I kept my word and stayed quiet. You have to tell him the truth.

William stared at the screen, his heart breaking because the man he loves has finally stopped looking for him, right when he is forced to step out of the shadows.

The irony was so cruel it was almost beautiful.

William had spent weeks hiding in the background, watching Est search for the person from that night. He had watched Est use his friends as tools, had watched Est desperately piece together fragments of a memory that would never return.

And William, in his cowardice, had let Est suffer.

But then he'd given Est advice that actually worked. He'd told Est to let go, to stop searching, to accept the mystery and move forward.

And Est had listened.

The man he loved had finally healed. Finally let go of the desperate need to find the person from that night.

Right when William was being forced to reveal that he had been there all along.

William dropped his phone onto the desk, unable to look at Hong's message

anymore. He sat on the edge of his bed, burying his face in his hands as the weight of the irony echoed in his mind. He realized the beautiful, devastating truth: his advice had worked so well that Est had finally healed, but that healing meant Est no longer cared about the person William truly was.

William had accidentally erased the only version of himself Est was looking for.

And now, when he stood in front of Est and told him the truth, Est wouldn't see it as a gift—a mystery finally solved, a question finally answered.

He would see it as a lie. A betrayal. A manipulation.

William buried his face deeper into his hands, his broad shoulders shaking silently in the darkness.

He would be brave.

And he would probably lose everything.